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SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/S, AF/EPS, OES/STC/ROTTIER, OES/PCI/SHAW  
PLS PASS DHHS FOR NIH/FIC/JLEVIN  
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SENSITIVE

E.O. 12948: N/A

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SUBJECT: SOUTH AFRICA - NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCE VISIT ON  
STRENGTHENING SCIENCE ACADEMIES IN AFRICA

Sensitive but unclassified-please handle accordingly.

11. (SBU) Summary: The National Academy of Sciences (NAS) has begun to evaluate potential partner countries for an initiative to develop science academies in Africa. The Gates Foundation-funded initiative seeks to build science academies' capacity to provide independent scientific analysis and advice to governments, particularly on human health issues. A U.S. mission team advised members of a recent NAS delegation to South Africa that some resistance to the initiative was likely, and encouraged NAS to obtain as much political support from government, academic and private sector institutions as possible. The involvement of prominent South African Dr. Mamphela Ramphele in the NAS effort should facilitate broad acceptance of the academy strengthening initiative. End summary.

//Background and introduction//

12. (U) Health Attache, Econ Minister-Counselor, USAID Health Adviser, CDC Deputy Director and ES&T Officer met on August 4 with three members of a visiting National Academy of Sciences (NAS) delegation to discuss South Africa's potential to participate in "The African Science Academy Development Initiative," funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The initiative will receive USD 20 million over ten years.

13. (U) NAS was tapped by the Gates Foundation to implement the initiative, which seeks to build the capacity of Africa's science academies to provide independent, evidence-based advice to their governments on science, particularly health-related matters. NAS has identified seven countries for engagement: Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Senegal, Cameroon, Ghana and South Africa. NAS will select three countries for "intense" partnering, and plans to hold annual meetings with all seven countries during the life of the initiative. NAS expects to make a preliminary decision on the three partner countries by November. Early next year, NAS will support an initial workshop in selected countries, after which it will make a final decision on partners. Next steps will include holding a forum on evidence-based policy-making to "illuminate" issues in a non-threatening way, followed by joint policy studies carried out by host country scientists in conjunction with training and support by the NAS, after which studies are to be carried out entirely by the local academies. These activities will be largely funded by the Gates Foundation initiative, but NAS will also increasingly require the local academies to raise supplemental funding. The three partner countries will also receive funding for physical infrastructure, communications equipment and staffing.

14. (SBU) Director of the Board on African Science Academy Development Dr. Patrick Kelley led the discussion and provided a summary of the initiative. He was accompanied by Board members Dr. Michael Clegg, a UC-Irvine professor who serves as Foreign Secretary to the NAS, and South African Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, Senior Advisor to the President of the World Bank and member of the Institute of Medicine. The visiting delegation also included Barney Cohen from the NAS and Dr. Narciso Matos of the Carnegie Corporation. The group arrived on August 1 and the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) organized a full schedule of meetings with numerous government departments, parastatal research councils, a science advisory body, a national association of university Vice Chancellors, and the Academy of Engineering. Kelley, Clegg and Ramphele reported that they had had excellent meetings and received a very positive reception almost everywhere. They requested Embassy Officers' perspectives, based on local engagement and experience.

//Academy Weak, Political Acceptance Critical//

15. (SBU) ESTOff told the delegation that the relatively new academy of science was not well engaged with the government, or influential in policymaking in South Africa. The visit

of the NAS delegation had in fact prompted unprecedented communication and collaboration among ASSAf and government authorities and research councils, a welcome development.

16. (SBU) The Health Attache noted that while establishment of an independent, credible academy of science was desirable, many obstacles -- such as underlying racial tensions linked to the past, challenges posed by the Department of Health including a desire for control over research findings, and even past perceptions of mismanagement at some science institutions -- could impede acceptance of the initiative. Health Attache encouraged NAS to engage with and seek support from the influential South African Cabinet, the National Treasury, as well as Parliament, private sector companies and academic institutions. He and USAID Health Adviser noted that several research institutions, the parastatal Human Science Research Council (HSRC) and Medical Research Council, along with the non-governmental Health Systems Trust, would likely feel threatened by the initiative. Kelley conceded that one "reluctant" interlocutor was Mark Orkin, President of the HSRC. Health Attache noted that none of the research organizations had the capacity to play an "umbrella" role, as ASSAf could. Using the initiative to enable ASSAf to generate research and advice could provide scientists with additional political protection to release reports that might not be well-received by some parts of the government. Ramphela noted that SAG Department of Science and Technology officials had acknowledged the value of independent analyses that the initiative would promote.

17. (U) Embassy officers pointed out that the NAS initiative complemented Mission initiatives to promote evidence-based policy decisions in the science area and linkages between U.S. and South African science institutions. NAS and EmbOffs also discussed human resource challenges facing all of Africa, in science, health and other sectors. Kelley noted that South Africa proposed the theme of "How to address the human resource shortage in health?" for its first workshop under the initiative.

18. (SBU) Comment: With sufficient buy-in and support from government, research councils and academic institutions, the Gates/NAS project has the potential to build the ASSAf into an influential and independent institution that critically informs government decision-making, a very desirable outcome. The involvement of the highly-respected and influential Dr. Ramphela will likely play a key role in assuring support from South African stakeholders. Officials at the Department of Science and Technology are solidly in support of the initiative.

FRAZER